TOO WONDERFUL?
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Psalm 72:1–7
Genesis 18:1–2, 9–15
Luke 1:5–13

"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"
Genesis 18:13 (NRSV)

Christianity sees God as the primal pilgrim,
traveling light-years from heaven's throne to Mary's womb.
. . . God comes in search of a guest-house in every human soul.

Donald Heniz
Christmas: Festival of Incarnation

Our hearts are full of gratitude, O God, for this moment in the life of our church,
and we ask you to bless it in the days ahead. Our hearts are full of gratitude for this lovely season of hopefulness and anticipation. Prepare our hearts and minds
and souls to be startled again by your coming into human history, into our lives,
in the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Two couples separated in time by nearly 2,000 years: Elizabeth and Zechariah, who are alive at the time Jesus was born, she is a relative of Mary, mother of Jesus, and Sarah and Abraham, back at the beginning of the story, on the very edge of recorded history.

The two couples are similar—chronologically, but also theologically, spiritually, and imaginatively. When something unexpected and extraordinary happens, they respond similarly; they all have trouble dealing with it. Their other similarities go right to the heart of who they are—two realities that are difficult, full of danger, for the preacher. So I'll let the Bible say it for me. Genesis 18:11: "Now Abraham and Sarah were old." Luke is a bit more politically correct: Elizabeth and Zechariah are "getting on in years."

There is a wealth of literature on the topic of aging. For some reason, people have begun to send me their favorite books on the subject. I have a growing stack: *The Grace of Aging, The Gift of Years, The Creative Retirement, The Joy of Not Working*. There is also a lot of bad humor on the topic: the comedian who says he's so old he no longer buys green bananas. It is a difficult topic, because no one wants to be called old. Programs with the words "old, older, senior citizen, golden years" are consistently boycotted by the very people they are created for because nobody wants to be called old. We did a market study for one of our mission outreach programs, the Center for Older Adults, and people were very clear: they wanted nothing to do with anything that had the word "old" attached to it.

The other difficult reality about these two couples is even more treacherous. They have no children. The Bible uses a problematic word, a word that sounds insensitive, cruel to modern ears: they, the women, in each case, are "barren." The last time I talked about it, a friend who wanted to be pregnant and wasn't said, "That word 'barren' is harsh, hurtful to me." Furthermore, when Sarah finally does conceive, she laughs: either at the joy of it, or the absurdity. In any event, when, years ago, I decided it was a joyous laugh and built a sermon on it, the choir director, a woman in her mid-forties with two teenage children and who just learned she was pregnant, unexpectedly and unintentionally, accosted me after the service and said, "There's nothing funny about this—and it certainly isn't joyful!" Happily, it became joyful, but it wasn't at that moment.

At a time and in a culture when the first and most important priority was the survival of the clan and tribe, producing children—lots of children—was obviously very important, so important that the Levitical law includes rules about anything that might impede the process, rules that do not translate into our own times and culture.

In the Bible, "barrenness" is a metaphor. It means emptiness, dryness, hopelessness, resignation. Land can be barren. An era can be barren. A nation can be barren. A man can be barren. Barrenness indicates the end of creativity, passion, productivity, and future hope.

Sarah, Abraham, Elizabeth, and Zechariah are at the end of possibility. There is no future. There will be no future.

A long time before, God spoke to Abraham, promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation and that he needed to get up and move —literally—to a new place, a new home. But that was a long time ago. After some initial giddiness when nothing happened, he and Sarah realized it was just a dream; maybe they had imagined the whole thing. Time passes. They resume their nomadic life, following their livestock in search of food and water, living in a tent.

One day Abraham is sitting in front of the tent. Sarah is inside preparing dinner. Three strangers approach. Bedouin hospitality requires a welcome and the offer of food and drink. These are no ordinary wandering strangers. They are on a mission from God. They are angels, which means "messengers from God." "Where is Sarah?" one of them asks. And then and there the promise is repeated: "I will return, and when I do, you and Sarah will have a son." Sarah is listening inside the tent. When she hears the business about conceiving and bearing a child in her old age, the nonsense, she laughs, out loud, and gets caught. Then there is that wonderful interchange between the Lord and Abraham and Sarah:

> "Why did Sarah laugh?"
> "I didn't laugh."
> "O yes, you did laugh."
> "Did not."
> "Did so."

And the question—the question of all questions: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

The same thing happens centuries later to Zechariah and Elizabeth, getting on in years, resigned, settled. When the angel Gabriel startles Zechariah with the announcement that his wife will have a baby, Zechariah doesn't laugh exactly, but he pushes back hard enough that the angel shuts him down and leaves him without a voice for nine months. He's a priest, clergyman. Ministers love this story, imagining a preacher without a voice, a preacher with nine months of enforced silence during which he or she can ponder the implications of speaking before thinking or praying.

It's that question that emerges from these stories that haunts us: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" I suppose there isn't a one of us who hasn't asked that question in one way or another.

Walter Brueggemann says it is

> the fundamental question every human being must answer. If the answer is "Yes, some things are too hard, impossible for God" then God is not God. We have not conceded radical freedom to God. We have determined to live in a closed universe where things are stable, reliable, hopeless. If, on the other hand, the answer is "No, nothing is impossible for God," this is an answer that accepts God's freedom, and that the self and the world are fully entrusted to God. (*Interpretation: Genesis,* p. 159)

It is a matter of basic faith, finally: Is your life a story that is already over? Is everything predictable, tied down? Are you resigned to the status quo,

whatever it is? Is there no place for surprise, no capacity to be startled by love and goodness and grace?

I cannot preach this sermon without thinking about a man who died last week after doing the impossible for decades. Ron Santo not only played major league baseball with type 1 diabetes, but lived a full and meaningful life, contributing laughter and joy to millions of people as the unique and irrepressible commentator in radio broadcasts of Cubs games, and who befriended thousands of people, children, who live with diabetes, and raised $60 million for its cure.

In these ancient stories about people who were in the process of folding their tents, shutting down, living out the rest of their years in the day-after-day empty routine, there is a reality that changes everything, a God who shows up in unexpected and unconventional ways, a God who doesn't mind shattering religious conventions and everyone's reasonable, rational, unimaginative expectations of the future, a God who comes to these dear old people and says, "There is a future; you have life to live and work to do and people to love."

Who isn't hungry and thirsty for that? Who doesn't need to know that the future is open and full of promise? Who doesn't need a word of hope this morning?

What this is leading up to, of course, is that amazing visitation of an angel to a young, unwed teenager, announcing that she will conceive and bear a son and name him Jesus and that he will be Emmanuel, God with us.

Brueggemann is insistent. The question requires an answer. "Is anything too wonderful for God?" Do you believe it? Do you believe it enough to live as if it were true?

There is something about Advent that startles us out of our resignation to routine, something that wants to awaken us to the new and hopeful and possible. There is something about Christmas, about the incredible notion of Incarnation, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us in that newborn and in the man he became, something about it all that suggests that the preposterous—peace on earth for instance, food enough for all, the cessation of violence in the streets, safety and security and well-being of all the children—is not so preposterous after all but gloriously possible; certainly no more preposterous than the coming of God in the humble birth of a child in Bethlehem.

Do you believe it enough to want to be a part of it? To live it? To be kinder and more forgiving, to be fair and just toward those denied fairness and justice; to be more generous, more compassionate, more loving; and to give

yourself to the building of God's kingdom, which is always coming into the world? To trust that whatever your barrenness, whatever in your life feels like a dead-end, feels hopeless, there is one who comes with healing and hope and peace and strength and grace and love.

In the fullness of time the angel came again, with another improbable, impossible prediction. It was to a young, unwed teenager, engaged to be, but not yet married, living with her parents in the village of Nazareth. She was as stunned as Zechariah and Elizabeth and long-before Sarah and Abraham with news of an impossibility, something so new it changed everything.

"You are going to have a baby, a boy. Name him Jesus. He will be Emmanuel, God with us."

Mary, perhaps because she is young and not yet resigned to the status quo, not yet cynical, has a little more imagination than Elizabeth and Zechariah, Sarah and Abraham. She doesn't laugh and she doesn't doubt, bless her heart.

She simply asks, "How can this be?"

And to her come those words again, those amazing, world-changing, life-changing words, Advent words: "Nothing will be impossible; nothing is too wonderful for God."

Amen.